

Top Contra Leader Says Arms Supply Missions Not Run by His Group

Participation by U.S. Administration Also Denied

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MIAMI, Oct. 31—A top Nicaraguan rebel leader said a clandestine air operation that supplied arms to his fighters was not run or financed by his group.

Adolfo Calero, one of three chiefs of the main rebel alliance, said the secret air missions, set up to drop arms to guerrillas in remote Nicaraguan jungles, was arranged by private intermediaries who he declined to identify. He said the operation ended abruptly when one C123K cargo plane involved was shot down Oct. 5 by Nicaraguan troops.

In an interview here in which Calero gave his views on the downing of the cargo plane, he denied that Reagan administration officials sponsored the arms flights, which began early this year. Nor, he added, did the administration form the extensive private support network that aided the rebels the past two years.

Calero's remarks left unresolved the mystery of who put up and disbursed the funds for the operation and who controlled it.

Calero said he never met or talked with William J. Cooper, the American pilot of the downed plane who helped pull together a team of more than a dozen U.S. fliers and cargo handlers for the risky resupply missions. Cooper was killed when the plane crashed.

The secret operation was set up, Calero said, by Cooper and other organizers working through a U.S. firm, Corporate Air Services. The organizers "talked with some people related to us," a reference to the unnamed go-betweens. Calero said the operation was conducted "in a compartmentalized way" so he had no contact with any American crew member.

Calero portrayed the resupply operation as one of several aid efforts that benefit the rebels but are set up separate from his organization and outside his management or even knowledge.

Telephone records from "safe-houses" used by crew members of the resupply operation in San Salvador, where the aircraft were based, show at least one call was placed from there to the Miami home of Aristides Sanchez, an aide to Calero who handles contra logistics.

Calero is a member of a triumvirate leading the United Nicaraguan Opposition, the main alliance of rebels, known as counter-revolutionaries or contras, fighting the leftist Sandinista government. He heads the largest contra army in the alliance, with an estimated 14,000 fighters.

Congress barred all government aid for the contras in October 1984, but voted last summer to resume it. Calero said the plane's downing showed that "private Americans were willing to fill the vacuum ... risk their lives" in the interim.

Last week, President Reagan signed a directive to permit the first deliveries of \$100 million in new military and logistical assistance. No shipments have reached his fighters yet, Calero said.

According to Calero, during the two-year cutoff he maintained "merely political" contacts with White House officials, who gave no direct assistance to the contras. White House and intelligence officials were prohibited by law from participating in or directing rebel military activities during that time.

Among administration officials Calero said he met from time to time since late 1984 were Marine Lt. Col. Oliver L. North, a member of the National Security Council staff who served as a liaison to the contras; White House communications director Patrick J. Buchanan, and former Reagan aide Faith Ryan Whittlesey.

"They would ask me where we stood—and I would ask them where they stood," Calero said.

Calero said there was "no secret" about his contacts with North, who he said made arrangements for three meetings for him and other contra leaders with Reagan at the White House.

Opponents of the administration's contra policy have asserted that Robert Owen, a youthful former Republican congressional staffer, served as a liaison in Central America between the contras and North.

At the request of Calero and two other top contra leaders, Owen was hired as a consultant to a State Department office that distributed \$27 million in nonlethal aid to the contras since June 1985.

Calero said Owen helped speed the flow of humanitarian aid to the contras, but was not a link to North. "I didn't need a messenger to the White House," Calero said, because his contacts were extensive.

Owen has declined comment about his role in Central America.

Of retired Air Force Maj. Gen. Richard Secord, who according to press accounts helped arrange some funds for the secret resupply effort, Calero said, "I can't tell you if he had a role or not."

Calero termed "ridiculous" claims that Vice President Bush oversaw the resupply operation. Calero said his encounters with Bush consisted mainly of "protocol."

Calero said, "Who is our No. 1 supporter? The president. He has even said, 'I am a contra.'" Reagan's public encouragement "carried a lot of weight and sympathy" with private donors, the contra chief said.

The contras obtained Soviet-bloc weapons such as the new AKSM assault rifles found in the shattered hull of the downed plane through transactions in Europe and the Far East, Calero said. He added that the rebels also received help from other foreign countries.

Calero responded with caution to reports from Washington that administration officials hope the contras will use the new aid to take and hold some territory inside Nicaragua.

"It will do us more good to have a wide presence in Nicaragua," Calero commented. "We're not going to do anything dramatic to please others. We will be in for efficiency, not for show."